# HIGH DISTURBANCE

Forestry is a passion of mine—one that appears in the very first chapter of *The Age of Scorpius*: Conviction Woods is a cursed temperate rainforest resembling Tongass National Forest, the largest cold rainforest in the world at nearly 17 million acres (National Forest Foundation, n.d.). I started my journey as a naturalist three years ago when I began guiding van and boat tours in Colorado and Alaska.[1] While advancing through a degree in restoration ecology, I volunteered, worked, and studied in the Tongass, Roosevelt, and Arapahoe National Forests. Most recently, I toured guests out of Denver for sightseeing and hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park.

After I published a shitty book and became the most hated author of the year, I drove toward a wildfire in the Colorado Rockies where smoke hazed the sky and a red sun glared through the atypical September heat. I hadn't been bothered to look up the fire's exact location. If my favorite canyon was aflame, I would've found myself blindly amidst a wildfire. At that time, walking myself into a wildfire would've been no more than a spark in my burning life—I was already standing at death's edge after barely surviving the week prior. I ignored my raw throat and strained lungs from the ash-laden air; those were becoming mundane grievances with each summer I lived in Colorado. Through the passing years, I have watched annual plumes of smoke thicken on the silhouette of the Foothills, the rising number of fire-impacted acres, the increased frequency of fire weather warnings, and the 70-degree summers atop the alpine tundra.

During my Colorado tours, curious guests often asked me about the blackened trunks and charred trees from the 2020 Cameron Peak fire. I'd explain the increase in severity of wildfires in the American West. They'd follow up with an inquiry as to why those massive fires were happening. Though I'd first emphasize the larger threat of climate change (IPCC, 2022), folks always seemed surprised when my answer to their question was much longer—and, like the fuel that set flame to my name, *misunderstanding* is the root of the reason why wildfires burn the crowns of the

forest.

Though a warming climate contributes to fires with increased drought and outbreaks of mountain pine beetles, a larger issue behind high-disturbance forest fires draws back to preservationist fire suppression in the 20th century (Andrews et al., 2007). Preservation is defined by the National Park Service as “hands-off management” and “no-use land.” By contrast, conservation—the preferred modality of today's environmentalists—properly “uses” nature with the goal of effectively managing the health of the forest (National Park Service, 2019). Indigenous practices across the world have known this much longer than we have (Itowaki, 2022)—unlike the Western tendency to protect nature with the hands-off approach, Indigenous beliefs often consider humans as a part of the ecosystem (UNDP, 2025). The First

People of the American West understood that the Rocky Mountain forests were not only fire-adapted, but that they *required* routine low-disturbance burns to maintain the health of the forest (The Institute for Science and Policy, 2025). However, the new European settlers who established federal natural land protections didn't carry the same knowledge as the Indigenous tribes whose home had been North America for centuries prior to colonization. In hubris, these settlers rejected any knowledge from the people whose land they were stealing. Thus, 1900s preservation-based protections stomped out any and all fires. Decades of this practice amassed flammable organic material in the underbrush, crafting the perfect recipe for fire fuel in forests weakened by climate change.

This just one of the ways the wounds of colonization are still with us today. Restoration ecologists now face a seemingly-impossible challenge for high-disturbance fire mitigation: there is more underbrush fire fuel than humans who are available to assist with control burns. With the overarching climate crisis (NASA, 2024), the negligence and misunderstanding of the functioning of the ecosystem burns so fiercely that it licks the crowns of our breathing giants.

Our breathing giants, the same giants who saved my life. As I sat in a canyon forest, I blinked away the tears blurring my sight of a cottonwood across the river. She stood still, unwavering; there was no breeze, no birdcall—only her presence, mine, and the sound of a rushing brook. The cottonwood didn't shake or waver in the face of an approaching fire; she had no control over its path.

As I wrote down the details of my surroundings in my pocket notepad, I cried with the realization of how I needed to take her silent advice. If she had caught fire, she either would survive and thicken her bark, or she would die to let the future forest regrow. I had two choices: I would either endure the flame, thicken my skin, and grow higher, or I would let it burn me alive to pave the way for my rebirth.

I slipped into a mental health episode that same night, one so severe that I was unconscious for close to three days; I woke only to eat, drink, and take care of my

unconscious for close to three days; I woke only to eat, drink, and take care of my animals. My terror, stress, and heartbreak were so intense that I did not want to be conscious and feel them. It was the apex of a spiral that had begun in July and worsened each day since.

I ended up taking the middle path of the cottonwood. I would stay grounded to fearlessly accept the heat, and set myself on fire to grow back stronger. Though dangerously close to death, I fought with the strange sense that *something* good was coming. I struggled to describe it, but I intuitively understood that I needed to face north and sprout. The skeleton of my burned forest had to be left in the past. With that in mind, I decided I would only fight harder for my passion. I booked a ticket to Helsinki, Finland, and gave myself two weeks to move out of my apartment.

Over the past two months, I watched as the internet's anticipation grew, even with my face a mystery, even with my voice absent. Content creators dug for any signs of life underneath my ashes, clawed at my apartment sublease listing to try to understand each of my moves. The pressure crushed my shoulders. I caught flame and burned alive for all to see—my signs pointed to death, the sparks started by my own killed the last of my life.

But I refuse that fate. I am a *survivor*. I always have been—I know how to fight my battles and overcome adversity; each time I burn, each time I lose all, I rise stronger than before. The forest has always been adapted to the flame: the lodgepole pine, for example, has serotinous pine cones that open and release their seeds when exposed to the intense heat of a blaze.

My rebirth comes from underneath the charred trunks and blackened stones, my saplings are nurtured by the north-facing sun.[2] Though this forest will regrow slowly, it will be tougher now—it is new, no underbrush to catch flame. I am shielded by the shadow of my own death; I face forward toward the north, I do not look back to the south behind me, I take the gentle warmth of the sun and pull myself from the dirt.

dirt.

I will regrow this forest, step by step. I will heal the ecosystem, beginning with this piece. Let me tell you how hot a high-disturbance fire burns, the one that came

from the spark of publishing an absolutely terrible book.

Hold on.

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Oh, *right*. I'm Audra Winter, that one author who went viral for my bad writing. What does ecological education have to do with addressing The Controversy?

I'll talk about it, don't worry; first, I wanted to speak toward a larger controversy, one that will affect every single one of us. I made a vow to myself as a naturalist, that any voice I was given, any platform I could stand on, I would try to raise awareness for all the wild places we call home. The world is burning and I will burn with it. We are not taking enough action for the climate; it must be done now.

The first step to movement is understanding, so let me retell this story: as it is, was, the truth behind each whisper and rumor. I couldn't breathe through the smoke. I needed time to let it clear my lungs. Writing this piece was so intensely personal and vulnerable that I had to step out of the flame to first gather my bravery. But—art requires vulnerability, and I cannot be an artist without first being vulnerable.

So, here goes nothing.

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My name is **Milo** Winter. I'm the creator of the World of Gardian, and this is what it's like to become hated for the thing I love the most.

On July 28, my peaceful morning TikTok FYP scroll was abruptly interrupted as I scrolled upon a video from another independent author; he was talking about how he'd just finished the worst indie book he'd read in a long time. As any reasonably paranoid author would, I kept watching his video. Though the other author *said* he wasn't saying names, he proceeded to talk about preorder numbers that I had accomplished. I felt my heart drop with each sentence he spoke. He lectured on the importance of hiring editors and quality control in independent publishing.

Horror rushed over me. He'd presented false information—that my book wasn't edited—as a concrete fact.

Within hours of his video going viral, I faced an inferno of my nightmares racing at me. I had done everything I could to put out a strong book—I started my

publishing process in February by hiring two editors with my scholarship money. I allocated a vast majority of my start-up funds to both a developmental and copy editor, then slowly increased my team of artists as the preorders began to take off. My developmental edits were returned to me in March, before the preorder chaos; my copy edits were returned to me in April, in the heat of the preorder chaos.

During this time, I was constantly in shock, exhausted, and overwhelmed from a rapid business start-up—and in the haze of implementing my copy editor's suggestions, I failed to notice that the edits themselves were insubstantial. In September 2025, Reedsy—the platform I hired both my developmental editor and copy editor through—initiated an investigation on the edit passes I'd received and requested third-party feedback from editors uninvolved in the project. I ended up receiving a full refund for my copy edit pass; both Reedsy and the third-party editors agreed that the copy edits I received for the first edition of *The Age of Scorpius* were not up to par. My copy editor reached out to me during Reedsy's evaluation, kindly apologizing and expressing her sympathy about the entire situation.

But, at the time of seeing the July 28th video, I didn't know that. To my understanding, I'd tried my hardest and done everything I could with hiring two experienced editors. It was too late to realize how massive of a mistake I made—within hours, I was receiving hundreds of comments on my videos. My worst nightmare was on repeat every minute and hour of my day. It would only worsen from there.

The ones that hurt me the most, though, were the accusations that I'd intentionally published a bad book—

*scammer*.

That word, it was the worst burn by far. I had reinvested all my funds from the preorders back to bettering the book; I'd never properly paid myself. I didn't feel the need to, if Gardian was the thing that mattered to me most in my life, anyway. I was plenty happy bringing other people joy with my world. I started a company, tried to give some artists a secure job, and adjusted into a space to pack and ship 5,000 books. All I wanted to do was tell my stories. Each refund processed turned a part of me to ash, a thing I'd worked so hard on, someone hated it so much they wanted to return my art back to me. It wasn't good enough for them.

Next it was the conspiracies. Maybe I was a nepo baby, or an industry plant; what if I paid for my followers? Did I constantly monetize my videos? Surely I used AI. People started taking the word of others for fact.

I'd been as genuine and honest as I could in my content, people were

assuming the truth behind words I'd never even said. I was being attacked, harassed by repeat individuals, and told some of the cruelest things I'd ever heard in my life. Even when I tried to speak about how much it was hurting me, I was told I was being too dramatic.

Be emotional, and I'm an attention-seeker. Be casual, and I'm too informal. Be formal, and I'm too corporate. Be genuine, and I'm too immature. Be confident, and I'm narcissistic. Be authentic, and I'm pity marketing. Be hurt, and I'm too sensitive. Be proud of myself, and I'm too cocky. Redo the book, and I'm money-obsessed.

Nothing I could say was the right thing to say.

The nightmare only worsened. I was cyberstalked by complete strangers who began obsessing over my personal life. Some tracked down my full legal name and encouraged users to comment it on all the videos they could find about me. Others had to "expose" the GoFundMe I used to crowdfund my service dog, Smidge. Smidge is considered a medical device prescribed to me by my doctor—half her cost was paid for by my state's vocational program, and I crowdfunded the other half. With my disability thrown out the window, I was accused of being a money-hungry grifter who stole donations. I made a TikTok page a couple years back to help crowdfund Smidge; I had no idea I hadn't deleted it. I'd *deliberately* avoided talking about Smidge on my main page, as I'm someone who is recognized in public.

I developed agoraphobia for the first time. I stopped leaving my apartment. I stopped eating. I stopped sleeping. I covered up my tired eyes and stress-swollen face with a mask of makeup. I tried to pretend like being perceived wasn't impacting me much more deeply than I had realized. I lost weight, reduced to skin and bones. I struggled to speak, struggled to talk, struggled to feel my passion. I fantasized death, haunted by the ghosts of my mistake. Without any sense of safety, I could not find comfort, and I hadn't recognized myself in the mirror for months in the first place.[4]

I tried to reassure myself by reading my own book... surely, it couldn't be *that* bad.

It was. It was *that* bad. I was overwhelmed with disgust and disappointment at my own writing. I couldn't believe myself, the errors I'd made, the mistakes I'd passed right by. It wasn't even close to what I knew I was capable of. Why did I release a debut so weak, compared to other writing I am so much prouder of? What in the world happened? What was I thinking? *Was* I thinking?

*No.* No, I couldn't have thought clearly when I was living in so much shock and overstimulation during the editing phases. My writing was confusing, my voice was fragmented, my characters weren't shining through. I was furious at myself, swallowed by my own humiliation and enragement, sickened by my own audacity.

My sales came to a screaming stop. My revenue projections were thrown out

My sales came to a screaming stop. My revenue projections were thrown out the window. I had a team of 20 artists I was either contracting or employing. All of them were furloughed. I failed them with my entrepreneurial attitude. I took financial risks and put all six figures back into my business. My business, the same one that suddenly stopped making money. Why the *hell* didn't I put some back into my savings? I couldn't even stay afloat myself, how had I cared more about Gardian than protecting my own livelihood?

And then it hit me. If I didn't turn it around, fast, I was back to square one.

But I failed at that, too. Here we are. Back at square one. The fire has been extinguished, there is no more underbrush to fuel it, yet many of you who are reading this will try to take these same words and use them against me.

You and I, we're more similar than you realize. There is a fundamental value we all share, as writers and artists—we are people who want to fight for creative representation in an era where it is so easy for each of us to catch fire with a spark.

With these high disturbance fires, there is a greater threat, a looming storm striking bolts into each of our forests and igniting our worst fears. The heated climate—the burning political scene across the world, especially in America—dries us artists out and starves us for sustenance, so we begin to compete with our neighbors for resources. The heat, it unleashes the invasive species, the massive swarms of industries and monopolies who will prey on our work. Our communities of artists are constantly plagued the intrusive fears that the beetle horde forces into our heartwood.

This is not just my forest on fire. It is all of ours; as creative workers, we are acquainted with the burns of both rejection and exploitation.

Get on your feet, clear the underbrush, and let yourself burn to rebirth, if you must—then take that fury upon the monopolies exhaling their waste into our heated climate; uplift each fellow life form in your communities. Stand up. Spark the flame with the oil leaking from the system's cogs.

Our forests all struggle to regrow after high-disturbance fires. The heat of a raging inferno can destroy the seeds in pine cones. It unlinks the ecosystem on a molecular level, the microbiome is disrupted, the connections between tree roots are severed. Organizations like Colorado's Wildlands Restoration Volunteers help the forest regrow through ecological restoration practices, often by planting drought-resistant ponderosa pines in high-disturbance fire scars. That's where community becomes critically important—these organizations often rely on volunteers to restore

and heal the land.

I'd like to think that my high-disturbance fire scars had to be touched by other human hands to regrow. I am endlessly grateful for those cheering me on, believing in me, and pushing me to get back up. There are so many people living the values and morals I've written about here. The positive messages kept all of us at World of Gardian going; I found deep value in the quiet encouragement amongst a storm of hatred. Those voices sang with hope through my recovery.

*Thank you* to all of those who have sent me words of encouragement. Even though I can't personally respond to every message, I think of them daily, those of you who still believe in me through it all. My team and family have also been incredibly supportive to me during this tough time both in my company, and in my life. They are my pack, my people, and I cannot thank them enough for their trust and love for art.

I wouldn't have been able to begin regrowing without the strength others gave to me out of the kindness of their own hearts. Our scars can only be healed when the community bands together—as in the forest, as in the artists, as in the writers.

# Footnotes

1. There is a specialized population of wolves that live in temperate/cold rainforests, and they're called Alexander Archipelago wolves (*Canis lupus ligoni*). Also known as the Island wolf, they are a subspecies of the gray wolf unique to the Pacific Northwest and Tongass National Forest. They eat salmon and swim in the ocean. You should read more about them, they're pretty cool creatures that should be respected and protected!

*Back to Origin*

2. A couple years back, I started working with Wildlands Restoration Volunteers to help replant ponderosa pine saplings in high-disturbance burnt forests from the 2020 Cameron Peak fire. We were taught to always plant them facing north, in the shadow of a fallen trunk or rock, to achieve the highest chances of the tree surviving its transplant. The north-facing sunlight nourishing the ponderosa pine

is not as harsh as the southern sun.
    - Oh, and also, I'm in Norway now. I've been healing in the Arctic Circle and Scandinavian mountains. I took "facing north" a little bit too seriously.

*Back to Origin*

3. You should open the source links, the environment is way more important than my gender identity. I just wanted to give you another talking point so I can bring attention to what matters to all of us:
    - **Search for what organizations in your city donate to environmental causes, protect your local natural areas, and/or accept volunteers for ecological restoration. Every ecosystem on this Earth needs help right now. We are *part* of the ecosystem. Go touch grass, put your hands in the soil, and plant trees, dammit.**
        - However, I am also not joking—yes, I am a transgender man, and yes, I go by Milo now!

*Back to Origin*

4. After internally and silently struggling with my gender identity for years, I redirected my energy into becoming hyper-feminine. I strove specifically for my dreams as an author where I could hide under a pen name, play the role of my persona, and really act the part… because, truthfully, Audra Winter was never *me*. If my life revolved around who I was as Audra Winter, if my videos relied on my presentation, I feared I wouldn't be successful if I changed.

   Throughout my life, I have been someone who struggles to listen to my own voice or watch a video of myself. As you could probably imagine, this did not fare well with the thousands of people mirroring my face back to me and referring to me

exactly as the role I forced myself into. I leaned more and more into the girlboss-entrepreneur-business woman stereotype, wondering if I was uncomfortable being perceived as so because of the amount of shock I was under. But, as reality sank in, I had a different realization when I flinched at every she/her, when I found myself disgusted at being so widely seen as a woman. I was playing an act, one I had played all my life, but it was a reality check to be ambushed by the complete disconnection between who I was and who I was being seen as—not on the hatred level, but simply on gender and identity. I hated seeing myself perceived as a woman. It worsened each video I watched of myself, I despised my own image, I couldn't recognize myself in old or new videos.

Audra Winter never *really* existed. At heart, the creator of Gardian is who I am

now, but I have always been far more than the fictional world I love the most—I am a naturalist, a traveler, a poet; a man.

*Back to Origin*

# Artist Statement

So, where am I now, and what led me here?

This piece, which started in August, was written in Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Kansas, North Carolina, Finland, Sweden, and, at last, Norway. Here in Norway, I am working alongside Sauli, WOG's art director, as we strive to reimagine the second version of *The Age of Scorpius*. Turns out, a lot can happen in a two-month time span!

There are far more stories behind this piece than I could even begin to touch on in an artist's statement. The first draft was angry and furious; I wrote a lot about

wolves on fire, being cornered, and lashing back at hatred. As I relocated from Colorado to Finland, my perspective began to shift. I reevaluated what I wanted to do with the voice I was given as a public figure. While America's fascist government demanded more logging and more oil at the expense of our natural lands, it hit me that I needed to refocus my attention on what matters the most. This piece became heavily ecologically-focused when the Trump Administration instructed removal of a 20+ year-old law protecting the Tongass from logging. It became clearer what I needed to speak for as I drove out of the Poudre's smoke-hazed roads, as I stepped into the Arctic Circle and felt its warm October days. It developed through Sauli—somehow—braving (and even enjoying?) my forestry yap sessions while I worked to conceptualize my story as an ecological metaphor.

Though I didn't initially plan to come out in this piece, with the number of eyes I have on me, I realized I could utilize the inevitable internet response I'd receive from coming out. The more I give people to talk about, the more eyes on ecology. No amount of internet hatred for my gender identity could ever compare to the humiliation I experienced in the wake of *The Age of Scorpius*'s release.

As soon as we mentioned on Patreon that I was relocating to Finland, someone tracked down my Facebook Marketplace listing, with my legal name, and shared my apartment online. Beyond the veil of many internet conspiracies concerning my disappearance, I simply crashed out and decided I needed to set my life on fire. I moved out of my apartment in Colorado, dropped my stuff in Kansas, and flew to Helsinki. Sauli welcomed me to Finland with the goal of kicking ass for Gardian. As we rework *The Age of Scorpius*, we are working closely together to weave a story unified with prose and illustration. We'll have more to announce soon.

At this time, I ask that you please respect my privacy. I will not be showing my face in any videos or content until the release of the 2nd Edition, unless I feel comfortable enough to do so earlier. But that doesn't mean we're not coming back strong—we'll be sharing teasers, trailers, and excerpts of book content (including the

chapters we already promised to you) here and on Patreon as Sauli and I recreate *The Age of Scorpius*. Our goal is still late Spring 2026, so *all* paperback and hardcover preorders for the 2nd Edition are continuing as normal! We've also put the 1st Edition e-book up on our website at a discount, because I am tired of my work getting pirated.

Thank you for your continued support, and I hope I taught you a little something about forests!

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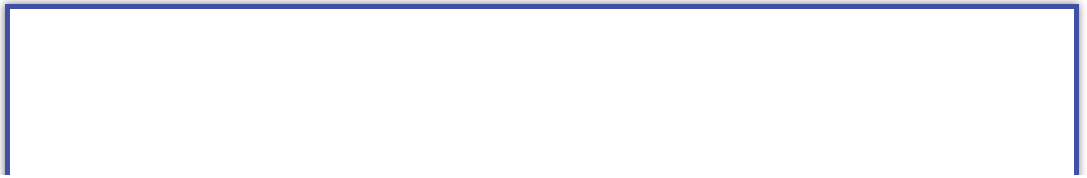
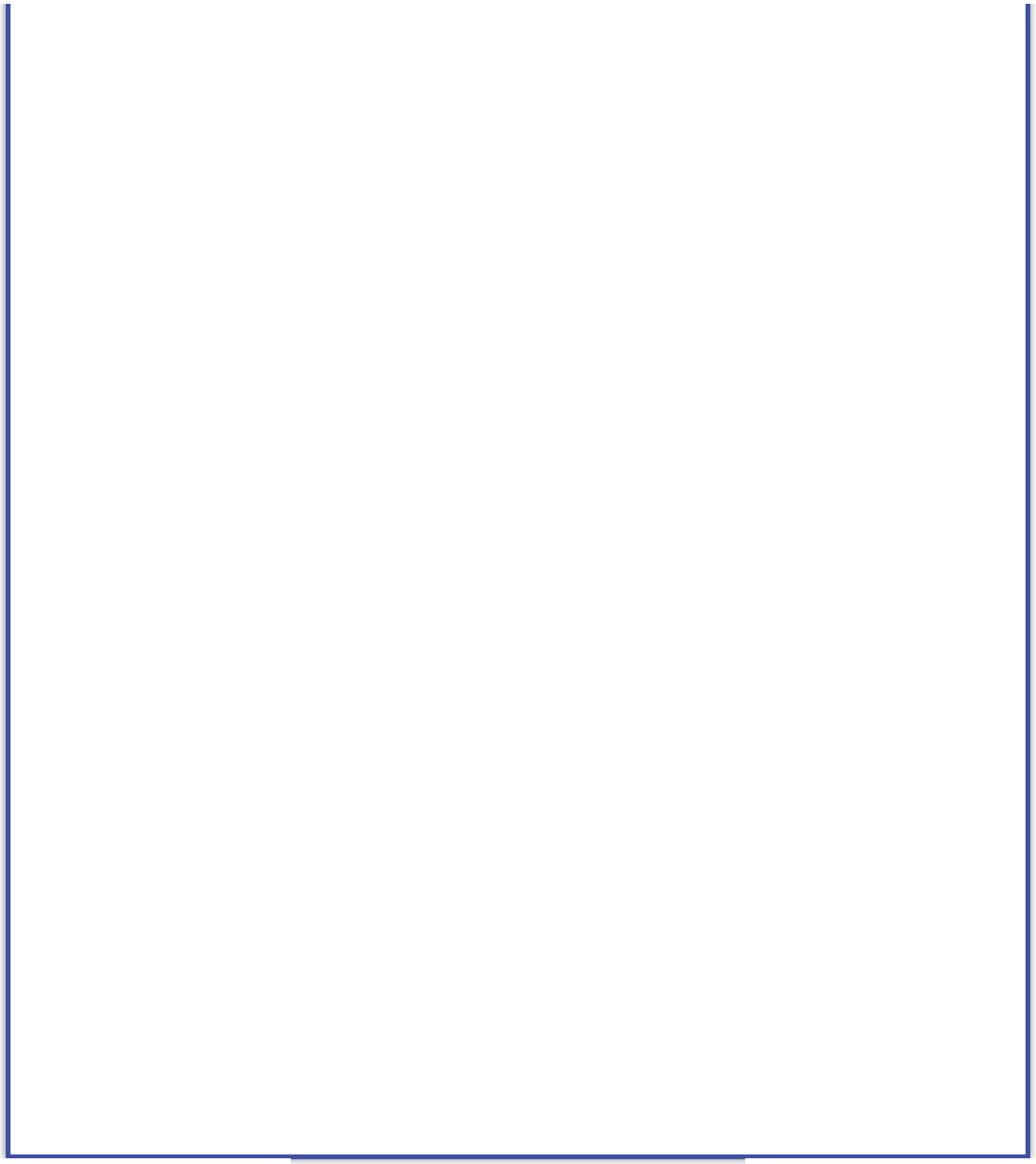
# From the Illustrator





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